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Dreaming of a Reality where the past & future meet the present

A report on the Second Encounter for Humanity and against Neoliberalism

by Andrew Flood

Imagine for a moment marching up a hill, lit only by starlight and a distant bonfire on a hot July night in August, in Andalucia, near the very tip of southern Spain. Looking at the stars you point out the red twinkle of Mars to the comrade whose arm you entwine. She comes from the opposite end of Europe. Behind you lies an agriculture estate, left derelict by its owner but now seized by agricultural workers. Behind you hundreds of comrades queue to try and ford the shallow river in the dark. On either side olive grooves stretch up the hills in neat rows, the red soil now dark and cool.

Someone on the road ahead starts singing 'A Las Barricadas' (To the Barricades) in Spanish, slowly this is taken up by others behind and ahead, in Italian, Turkish and other languages, sometimes just hummed or whistled by those who don't know the words. The Spanish version is familiar to me from a scratchy recording an Italian comrade passed on to me on tape. The original recording is of 500,000 people singing this working class anthem at a rally of the anarchist CNT in Barcelona, July 1936, days after the revolution there.

Those on this road have gathered from all over the world, over 50 countries in all. They have temporarily left the struggles in their own countries to come here to dream of a new reality together. Here the weather beaten features of a male campesino from Brazil, are found beside the sunburned features of an 18 year old female squatter from Berlin. Do you feel you are imagining something impossible, something from a Hollywood blockbuster or the past? Then add one more detail, a gasp goes up from those on the road for overhead a shooting star briefly appears. Were it not for the collective gasp each of us may have imagined this was a vision we alone were seeing. But no, we look around and realise we are marching, seeing and dreaming together.

In our modern world The Power tells us such dreams are no longer possible. History has ended, there is no dream just the reality of alienation, work and obedience. Yet the scene above is not from a film or from a history book, rather it took place on the evening of August the 2nd 1997. This was the 'Second encounter for Humanity and against Neoliberalism'. I could describe it in cold, political terms alone but this would miss the 'for humanity' part and in truth for every day we discussed organising 'against neoliberalism' we spent another 'for humanity'. In this text I'm going to try and give a sense of what it felt to be there. In the future I hope to write some further pieces taking up the political and organisational points it threw up

Like the first encounter the organisation of the second encounter in itself deserves a few comments. The encounter was planned and organised on a European level with three continental meetings, the first in Zurich in December of 1996, then in Prague and finally Barcelona. The encounter was thus organised without a central committee through co-operation on a continental level demonstrating the possibility of a different way of organising.

The news of the encounter flowed down many paths in many languages, It made huge jumps via the internet and fax and smaller ones as leaflets, pamphlets, on radio shows, in photo exhibitions and during a million conversations. In these ways the news of the encounter to be was put into the hands of those marching in Derry in February 1997 against the massacre of civilians by the British army there 25 years earlier, but it also reached landless campesinos occupying land in Brazil, refugees from the Western Sahara in camps in Southern Algeria, anti-road protesters in Britain, 1st nation activists in Canada, those running a 'pirate university' for workers in Turkey, environmental campaigners in Columbia, academics in South Africa, anarchists in Poland the list goes on and on. It echoed right down to the villages in the mountains and jungle of the Mexican South East where the idea of the first encounter had emerged from.

Back from all these places the same message bounced, I want to be there. It flowed back through postal systems, on horseback, down phone lines, out of fax machines onto the internet and found its way to Spain. We are coming. Alongside this came longer messages bearing titles like "Resistance to Neoliberalism: A View from South Africa" as dozens of papers began to arrive to be translated and circulated.

Flowing to Spain

And so in July people from everywhere began to prepare and to travel. The came on boats, by plane, by car and bus and train, even a few by bicycle. They dug out multi-coloured ruck sacks and crammed them with toothpaste and documents, sleeping bags and videos, they got out their maps and compasses, took their bearing for Madrid and started off. As we got closer the streams started to merge until a river of people arrived from the Metro station to fill the public buses to San Sebastian de los Reyes a small and dusty town outside Madrid. On the bus we started to exchange smiles and questions like 'and you..where are you from'

We were all headed to the registration centre at the Leon Felipe public school, where the Madrid organisers were confronted with a Tower of Babel of delegates trying to register in dozens of languages. Under the pressure people were tired and arguments flared over seemingly pointless bureaucracy or stupid on the spot decisions (like the brief but quickly defeated one to charge people coming from the '3rd world' the full subscription rate). But then again this was a massive international gathering of thousands of people organised with almost no funds by unpaid volunteers. So let's not dwell too much on such mistakes but instead learn from them for the next time.

That night we had the first of many fiestas in another nearby school where we drank our first beers and exchanged our first experiences. Another area of debate that, the attempt by the organisers to fiesta us to death. By my reckoning I was at a minimum of 6 organised fiestas in the course of nine days. As we also spent two nights travelling between venues, this, added up to a punishing schedule. Again a point to be consider next time in particular as the cost of some of these fiestas could have been used to help finance people travelling from poorer communities.

The inscription continued the following day and that evening the opening ceremonies were held in the Plaza de Toros a nearby bull ring. There the two delegates from the Zapatista communities read out greetings in which they prophetically warned us that "As companions in the struggle for harmony in our world, we say that it is necessary to put up with heat, thirst and tiredness, like a farmer who puts up with everything because he has faith in his work in the fields." These were indeed prophetic words for the week ahead of us.

By now everyone had arrived who was travelling to Madrid but all were not yet registered. The first of those registering that morning at 7.00 were passing the survivors limping back from the party the night before. Then it was onto the buses to transport people to the massive Embajadores squat in the centre of Madrid where we stored our bags while we demonstrated through the centre of the city. There were banners in many languages and once the march started a very impressive singing of Bella Ciao by the hundreds of Italians who had come for the encounter.

From the end of the march we returned to Embajadores to eat and collect our bags before we split up for the five different locations in the Spanish state the tables were being held in. I set out for the train station alongside others heading north to Barcelona for the economics and culture subtables. In the station itself we sung and chanted as we waited for our train to be ready. We travelled overnight on a specially chartered train to Barcelona.

Arriving at 8.00 in the morning we first formed a cordon through the train station for the 'security' of the Zapatista delegates who had travelled with us. The we marched in a long column through the streets, at one point passing under a squat from the roof of which large exploding fireworks were being fired in welcome. This of course brought the neighbours out on their balconies along the route to wonder what this motley, tired and unwashed sample of the worlds population were up to. In a local Sports hall we were fed and arrangements for the week were explained to us. At this point the two Zapatista delegates addressed us before we split up into our respective sub-mesas and travelled to the squats, schools or community centres they were located in.

Many of us felt Barcelona was a fitting location for part of the second encounter. It was the centre of the anarchist revolution that had swept much of Spain some 61 years earlier, a revolution that in the last few years had become a point of redefinition for sections of the left. Some of the Italian and Spanish activists related how they had marked this convergence of the past and the present that morning

> "...at the Le Pertuse frontier post on the Spanish/French border, a frontier post through which members of the International Brigades and Spanish exiles were forced to flee after the Civil War. Here there is a monument which records their passage, a pyramid-shaped monument with a broken apex. The Catalan, Italian and French comrades already present in Barcelona that day brought banners... and placed them at the foot of the monument."

Starting work

The information sub-table of the culture mesa consisted of a hundred people meeting as guests of the Ateneu Popular (Popular/peoples centre) in the Nou Barris suburb of Barcelona. The first and only item on our agenda was how we were going to conduct the discussions. Put 100+ activists in a room with this alone in front of them and your asking for trouble, and indeed this resulted in an afternoon of discussion on whether we should meet as one large group or not and the following morning what areas of discussion each group should have.

We came up with quite a novel solution which recognised the different reasons people had in coming to the encounter and the particular needs they had. There were three topics of discussion

1. A critique of the existing (neoliberal) media
2. Our experiences of alternative media
3. Constructing a the network of communications between struggle

Rather then each group taking one of these the first group of around 25 people discussed 1, 2 and 3. The second group of around 40 people discussed 2 and 3 and the third group also of around 25 people discussed 3 only. This meant those who had come for developing an analysis or an education could join the first group while those of us in a rush to construct something practical joined the C group. Although it wasn't obvious at the time the process of reaching these decisions was in itself very useful in drawing the group of 100 or so together and defining the purpose for which we had come.

Over the next three days I managed to send brief reports out onto the internet, one of the strange features of this mesa was how many of the delegates sleeping on mats in school halls were equipped with portable computers, digital cameras and other playthings associated with the rich and famous. But with these we succeeded in putting up on the spot accounts and pictures of the encounter in process. The sub-group I worked with dealt with the issue of how to form the network of information between struggles. The call for this network had emerged from the previous encounter in Chiapas and was contained in the closing statement.

> "That we will make a network of communication among all our struggles and resistance's. An intercontinental network of alternative communication against neoliberalism, an intercontinental network of alternative communication for humanity.
>
> This intercontinental network of alternative communication will search to weave the channels so that words may travel all the roads that resist. This intercontinental network of alternative communication will be the medium by which distinct resistance's communicate with one another.
>
> This intercontinental network of alternative communication is not an organising structure, nor has a central head or decision maker, nor does it have a central command or hierarchies. We are the network, all of us who speak and listen. "

The group developing on this started with people from the USA, Denmark, Barcelona, Italy, Mexico, France, Ireland and Turkey and we were soon joined by others including people from Belgium and Columbia. Most but not all of these people had experience in communication, from Pirate Radio and small circulation magazines to regional TV stations. We decided to work in English and Spanish as everyone there had a working knowledge of one of these languages.

This seems a fitting place to comment on the purpose of the encounter. Too often such meetings are designed and judged only in terms of concrete written outcomes. So everything becomes streamlined to reach these outcomes and commonly democratic process goes out the window. This may occur directly by having a pre-set and rigid agenda and eliminating all discussion off this or in an indirect way by not allowing time for translation and understanding of what is being said.

It was a strength (if perhaps also at times a source of frustration) that at the information table at least this was not allowed to happen. Despite the fact that we were some 100 people speaking many different languages and from widely varied experiences, our discussions aimed at generating if not a consensus then at least the formation of a question to be voted on that was reached by seeking consensus. Perhaps using the more traditional way we would have emerged at the end of the week with a massive blueprint of intermeshing cogs in a global information network but like so many grandiose documents before it this would have represented another paper tiger destined to spontaneously combust in the heat of any real struggle.

What we discussed

We spent much of our time deciding what needed to be discussed, this in itself of course highlighted many vital questions. In time I hope some of the detailed agreement reached in these discussion will be made available on the net, for we made some

effort to produce agreed documents/statements. What follows is a sketch of the discussion taken from notes and reports I kept at the time.

A. What is the purpose of the network

> How can we make sure the news/information we transmit is reliable, what sort of guidelines can we have to also ensure it is relevant?
> How can we prevent the exclusion of women and other groups from the network?

We did succeed in producing an agreed statement of purpose after much debate.

B. The Internal organisation of the network

> Should we be based only on local media, is this the same as alternative media?
> How can we have solidarity between different information networks, how can we make our information reliable?
> Should we have a logo to identify the network and if so which logo?
> How can we finance this work?
> How can the network make 'expert' opinion and analysis available to any and all of the nodes.
> How can we defend the network?

Much of the discussion around the internal organisation of the network took place in a visual manner that is not easy to relate in words. We started off by rejecting the traditional pyramid structure of news media where local sources feed up to region level, which feed to national and perhaps the global level before news trickled down again to other regions. In discussing what a network without a centre could look like but in recognising that some people have more time and resources to dedicate to the flow of information then others, we came to use the human brain as an analogy. Here the many nodes have major paths that carry information between them but it is possible for any two nodes to form a connection and for any connection to improve in speed and the amount of information it can carry if this is needed. Therefore many minor paths also exist. There is also a two way flow of information and feedback on the information that is sent.

This image flowed out of what the network already is in practise. We considered for instance the path a communique from Marcos might take after he has written it in the heights of some Ceiba tree in the mountains of the Mexican south east. Perhaps it goes on horseback to the nearest settlement, from there by car to San Cristo'bel where it is typed onto a computer, translated and suddenly takes more paths, perhaps by fax to newspapers and solidarity groups on the one hand, on the other it jumps onto the internet and runs down the telephone lines to listserv's like Chiapas95. Here it replicates hundreds of times and make its way onto a desktop in Ireland where it jumps onto web pages and more lists but also gets printed out and stuck up as a poster in a bookshop or reproduced and distributed in the Mexico Bulletin. Simultaneously it has arrive in Istanbul, where it is also printed out and travels by bus to some distant town and a union meeting. Multiply this path by thousands and consider all the alternatives and we see the network already exists without a centre, indeed the different nodes have not only never met but can be unaware of each others existence.

So rather then invent and plan a new network our task was to see what existed and see how we could, in a few days develop this existence and improve the flow of information.

C. What methods of communication should we use.

There was a tendency to confuse the idea of the network with the internet and many people there had either no internet access or very poor internet access. So while the internet may form one of the major fibres of information flow it could only be one among many which would include printed words, fax, phone, radio and horseback messengers. We also needed to be open to use new forms of communication and indeed one of the most ambitious papers at our table called for the setting up of a global TV/Radio satellite channel.

Outside of the physical methods of communication we also discussed other problems with communication.

> How do we minimise language and cultural barriers?
> How do we prevent a flood of useless information which drowns the useful content in a sea of words?
> Can we have different layers of information so more information can always be obtained from summaries?
> What sort of feedback mechanisms are possible?

D. Action

How can we show solidarity between the different nodes of communication?
How can we develop the many media forms?
Can we construct a network of exchange of people so those travelling can come into contact with local activists.
How do we prepare to defend the nodes of our network and the network itself from the repression which will inevitable follow success?
How can we arrange an exchange of skills within the network so that people can be trained where this is needed?

One problem with this discussion was the different expectations people had of the network and of what was possible. Some had clearly come with the idea that at the end of the week we would have a detailed plan of a new network of communication and how it could be put into operation. But the network we have described is an organic one already in existence and already growing. Our role was more to begin a description of it and come up with ways to encourage its growth.

In the course of the week in Barcelona we also mobilised in support of one of the squats where the encounter was being held. In a piece of blinding stupidity the council had announced its intention to evict this in the middle of the week. They actually backed down on the day of the demonstration itself so this became a victory march through the Hospitalet district complete with Samba bands, stilt walkers and fire jugglers. An enduring image from the demonstration is one of a Brazilian carrying the flag of the MST, the movement co-ordinating the occupation of farmland by landless campesino's on this demonstration in support of the occupation of a building in one of the big industrial cities of Europe.

Another highlight of the week was the showing of a video of the Milan train occupations. These occurred in June of this year when 4,000 Italians occupied two trains in Milan and succeeded in travelling right across Europe to the demonstration against the EU summit in Amsterdam, focal point of the European march against unemployment. The video was produced by Italian autonomists from a social centre in Rome that we were thrilled to learn was in an old military fort complete with a castle and a drawbridge. Both of these were two among many examples of how the encounter was bringing people from different traditions of struggle into contact with each other so that we could draw inspiration and learn from each others struggles.

Outside of the formal sessions, a constant one to one exchange of experiences was also taking place, as we met over breakfast, dinner and lunch or for a drink in the bar. There, criticisms of the organisation of the encounter were mulled over, too many parties, too much travel, not enough attention on subsidising the expenses of people from Africa, Asia and Latin America. Alongside this were the more personal experiences of struggle in our respective countries and our individual experiences of organisations involved in those struggles. These threw up many, many political issues, new perspectives and new ways of looking at old problems. The value of this sort of exchange cannot be over estimated, by seeing the struggles of others we come to understand out struggles better. They also created the conditions for new friendships to form. The hospitality at the Nou Barris Atenou Populare was extraordinary, our lunches were not only excellent but accompanied by enough wine to suspect the intelligence agencies had come together with a new and cunning plan to sabotage our deliberations.

The end of our period in Nou Barris came all too soon. We rushed at the end to get as much down on paper as we could, our group fragmenting into sub groups to draft statements and then in a final session debating these into a form everyone could feel happy with. This involved many compromises, mostly consisting of looking for new ways to express old ideas so they avoided the jargonistic language associated with one or the other political tradition. Then the three sub-groups of the culture-information table came back together and in the report back we discovered that at the end we had all arrived by different paths to very similar conclusions.

Goodbye Barcelona

Our period in Barcelona ended with all the sub mesas gathering in a public park to read back their conclusions and with yet another fiesta before departing for Andalucia. I spent much of my time rushing around finding people I'd met in Madrid and asking them how their tables had gone. A common overall pattern emerged of the first day being spent in a frustrating debate over how to organise the discussion followed by a few days of discussion that was only really getting going before it had to end. Facing a long journey right down and across to Spain many people expressed reservations about the amount of time being used up by internal travel in Spain. Time which could have been used to give another day or more worth of discussion.

Many people had chosen not to make the long journey to El Indiano so this was also the time to say good-bye to both old and recent friends. The rest of us, carrying bags of fruit and sandwiches as well as 5 litre bottles of water for the long, hot journey south set out for the train station where true to (recent) tradition we passed the time singing and chanting. Rumours

were flying at this stage, the journey was 18 hours, it was 50 degrees in Cadiz, we would have to walk to El Indiano from the train station etc, as we boarded the train, grabbed carriages and settled down for the night and the long journey across the Spanish state.

Not everyone was as sensible. Some took refuge in the 'dining' carriage where throughout the night and into the next day vast amounts of liquid refreshment were consumed to the sound of revolutionary songs from every corner of the globe. If the truth was told, by the early hours of the mornings the songs were becoming shorter as word were forgotten but the spirit was there. It is probable that on that long train journey south many friendships became more 'involved' as kindred spirits living in this temporary and mobile 'free world' reached out to each other in the dark of one hundred compartments. All through that night and into the next day the train rolled south and as the sun rose so did the heat and it kept rising and rising as further south we went into a land of red soil, sunflowers and olive trees stretching into the distance.

The journey took 20 hours by train and another 30 minutes or so by coach to the small town of Puerto Serrano. Here we were to stay for the night in public schools and our arrival in the town was like that of locusts, as hot and thirsty from the journey, we descended on the local kiosks and shops to strip them of ice cream and everything cold. Here too we ran into that most humorous form of (dis) organisational chaos in the form of two gates each guarded by a large bearded men shouting at us to go to the other one. Eventually something was sorted out and the thousands of a activists flooded into the schools and their grounds to stake out spaces for tents and sleeping mats before heading for the showers and the legend of a local swimming pool.

That evening there was the inevitable fiesta. We formed into a long column outside the schools and marched there, although definitely more of a manifestation then a demonstration. The locals turned out in force to watch the world pass by. At one point an old man stood outside the house, both arms above his head, cheering those marching by. From his age and obvious joy we speculated that here was a participant whose eyes had seen the struggle that Spain represented to so many of us, the Spanish revolution of 1936. We were after all in the olive groves of Andalucia where a previous generation had fought and died for their vision of a new world.

An end, a beginning or a process?

The final day of the encounter confirmed the rumour that we were to walk to El Indiano, a agricultural estate squatted by the union 'Sindicato de Obreros del Campo'. We were assured however that if we rose early to miss the sun the 3km walk would not be difficult. So up we got and off we marched being passed at one point by a JCB digger its front bucket crammed with several punks who had hitched a lift from a local. Revolutionary Spain briefly met Mad Max on that road.

The end was an anti-climax, throughout the long, hot day each table reported back in three languages, Italian, Spanish and English. This was an idea that had been lifted directly from the last encounter and this time around it worked out even worse than then. Basically each statement started with a neoliberalism is generally bad, its bad for the issue that concerned our table because blah, blah, blah and we need to create and alternative. The wiser or lazier amongst us spotted this early on and vanished down to the river for the day where to the neglect of out revolutionary duty we made the most of the sun, the water and the surrounding nature. Which is not to say no work was done, we choose to spend the day exchanging experiences (gossiping) and making links (cementing friendships). In the evening we returned to hear the closing words of the Zapatista delegates before making our way back along the road, this is where the shooting star appeared and this account begin.

From here there is little to tell or there is everything to tell, the 2nd encounter ended but the encounter for humanity and against neoliberalism goes on. Each returning activist is telling this story in their own words, in their own language to their friends, their organisations and within their struggles. From there perhaps many more will take interest and come to see the need for

> "... a collective network of all our particular struggles and resistance's. An intercontinental network of resistance against neoliberalism, an intercontinental network of resistance for humanity.
>
> This intercontinental network of resistance, recognising differences and acknowledging similarities, will search to find itself with other resistance's around the world. This intercontinental network of resistance will be the medium in which distinct resistance's may support one another. This intercontinental network of resistance is not an organising structure; it doesn't have a central head or decision maker; it has no central command or hierarchies. We are the network, all of us who resist."

We have fulfilled the promise of the first encounter through the act of meeting again, let us continue this meeting and exchange into our future, for humanity and against neoliberalism.

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